

Revelation 5:1-14
Power of a Crucified Savior
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
7-6-14

If you would, bear with me for a moment while I conduct a small experiment. Now I'm no expert in time and space, but what Albert Einstein and others have told us is that time and space are not absolute, but are bending in relationship to one another. So I've asked Sue Rose, our clerk of session, to keep an official WPC record of this moment, and if time travel becomes real in the future, someone will come back to this moment. So with that in mind, let's start the countdown at 5...4...3...2...1.

Nothing.

A few years ago Tina Fey, anchor of the Saturday Night Live Weekend News update, predicted a similar outcome when she told the audience about a similar event at MIT in which students hoped that people from the future would come back to their time traveler party. Too bad, people from the future already know that the party stunk.

We live in a society with an unhealthy preoccupation with the future. Or in other words, we live in a society where people worry.

This morning we come to the conclusion of our 15-week look into the broad over-arching themes of the Bible. And it is good that God knew about our predisposition to worry about the future, and that's why the Bible doesn't simply end with the Apostles' instructive letters that we spent the last two weeks on. In this grand narrative of God's interaction with the world throughout the Old and New Testament, ultimately through the person and saving work of Jesus Christ, God knew that his people would want to know how it all would end.

Anyone here ever get into a really good book, then peek forward to the end to make sure all your favorite characters are still there?

Revelation is a book about the future. Now there are all sorts of wild and fantastical interpretations of Revelation. In fact, I think we would all agree that there is no more confusing and disorienting book in the Bible than Revelation. But if I was going to sum it up, I would say this: Revelation is a book written about and for people who are going through intense struggle and deep conflict with the world around them at any given time in history—including this very day; and the God who is at work leading and vindicating his people, leading to victory.

We know the end: God wins, we win, grace and mercy and forgiveness and love...win!
And death is swallowed up within itself forever.

So what is this Revelation? Notice I didn't say Revelations. There's only one, and it was given to a prophet named John who was exiled on the Roman prison island called

Patmos. While John is in exile, he receives a vision, a picture of the heavenly throne room. What we read today was the description from John when he saw 7 scrolls sealed with seven seals. The scroll image here is that of a royal edict or decree dictated from the King, written and sealed with wax by the royal ring. When royal decrees are made and sealed, only the person to whom it is addressed can open the seal.

The problem John sees here is there's no one who is able to open the scrolls. The angel is crying out, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And so being the good Presbyterians that they are, they set up a search committee, and the committee comes back. "We've searched in heaven and on earth and under the earth and no one was found who was worthy to open the scrolls."

And John wept. None of the angels could do it – not Michael the Archangel, not Gabriel, none of the cherubim or seraphim who sit around the throne, not Moroni (the angel that sits atop every Mormon's temple). Then we went down onto the earth and couldn't find anyone there who was worthy to open its seals. President Obama wasn't able to open the seals, but neither was Paul Ryan or John Boener, no governor, no senator, not the Secretary General of the UN, not the Israeli Government, not the Palestinian Authority. Other areas as well, the Fox News couldn't do it, nor could MSNBC. Bono couldn't open it, neither could Desmond Tutu, or Joel Osteen. And try as they may, with all their resources, neither could Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie open the scroll.

And then they looked under the earth, in the realm of the underworld, and no one was found there either who could open the seal. When John heard this he wept. Where is history moving? Is there any hope for the world?

Then all of a sudden, there's someone who says, "We've found someone, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah," only when it appeared it wasn't a lion but a little lamb. The lamb who was slain. Then in the heavenly realm this hymn breaks out: **worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom of priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth.**

Jesus the Lamb of God is above all principalities and powers above the earth, and is mightier than every nation on the earth and above every thing under the earth and he alone is able to take the seal and to open it and reveal to us the truth about history and where it is going.

But this seems odd, doesn't it? Why does the Incarnate one, the Logos who was before time and through whom all things live and move and have their being, have to open the seal to know where the future is going? In Mathew 28, when Jesus is giving his disciples the Great Commission, he tells them "**All authority in heaven and on earth and under the earth has been given unto me. So go and make disciples and baptize.**" He says it has been given to him. Wasn't it his first? Why did the eternal one, the one whom Paul describes in Philippians 2 as being in the form of God and equal to the Father, submit himself to the cross so that he would then be given a name that was above every name? It

was God's to begin with, and Jesus, being one with the Father and Spirit as our confessions of faith remind us, it belonged to him as well. Yet by his outstretched, nail-pierced hands, Jesus had to buy it back from the powers and principalities. So that he could return to his disciples and say "all authority has been given unto me." Jesus gives new meaning to authority, new meaning to freedom, and a new vision of the future as he stands there, the lamb who was slain.

So what does this mean for us today? What does this vivid picture of seals and scrolls and lambs have to say to us today?

The first thing I think it tells us is that our future is going somewhere. If you go on to read the ensuing chapters of Revelation, you will see that there is a lot of bad stuff that is about to happen in the world, beasts and dragons and lakes of fire. But before all of that, you have this beautiful hymn of chapter 5. You see, it is possible for us to endure, for us to patiently endure, if we know where it's going—whose hands it's in.

How is your future looking? Are you seemingly in the earlier chapters of your story, and the future still seems like a fuzzy, far off thing? Or are you perhaps closer to the closing chapters and there is a lot more conflict and uncertainty towards the end? Perhaps there are health problems, or questions of financial or job security, maybe you are in the midst of caring for a parent or loved one who is close to the end, and there are just so many questions that need answers.

I want you to hear this very clearly. It's a quote I heard from another pastor, "**Your weakness will never keep Jesus from winning on your behalf.**"

Secondly, because we have this hope that in the end nothing can keep Jesus from victory on our behalf, we have a new and living hope for our present. God has our pasts, presents, and futures all safely in his hands, so we don't have to worry about the end. And that sets us free for unending worship.

I love how the old hymn puts it so beautifully:

*My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation
I hear the sweet though far off hymn
That hails a new creation:
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I'm clinging;
Since Christ is Lord of Heav'n and earth,
How can I keep from singing?*

I don't know about you, but I think that Revelation 5 is the most beautiful and compelling picture of worship in the entire Bible, or in all literature for that matter. And Jesus is the center. Once the elders and the creatures realize the lamb is him, all of creation begins to

fall down in worship. All of creation is being re-centered around this lamb who was slain. He is our center, and we need a center.

Eugene Peterson says that without worship, we fall into a cycle of spasms and jerks. At the mercy of every advertisement, every magazine cover, every siren. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness with no sense of direction. Worship is what we are made for, worship keeps us in steady stability. Jesus is the center.

Reminds me of an email I got this week from Barb Maggart with a story about when Billy Graham was recently invited to speak in Charlotte. There he told a story about the great physicist Albert Einstein, who was once traveling from Princeton on a train, when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his trouser pockets.

It wasn't there. He looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He still couldn't find it.

The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it."

Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket.

The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are; no problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one."

Einstein looked at him and said, "Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going."

Having said that Billy Graham continued, "See the suit I'm wearing? It's a brand new suit. So I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and one more occasion. You know what that occasion is? This is the suit in which I'll be buried. But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to immediately remember the suit I'm wearing. I want you to remember this: 'I not only know who I am. I also know where I'm going.'" Because he worshiped Jesus as the center of his life.